

## **Lawmaker wants \$10B for shuttles**

**Proposal would extend program past its 2010 retirement deadline**

By Todd Halvorson and Eun Kyung Kim  
Florida Today  
December 18, 2007

CAPE CANAVERAL - The United States should invest an extra \$10 billion in NASA during the next five years so the nation does not become reliant on Russia to launch American astronauts, a local lawmaker said Monday.

U.S. Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Indianapolis, is introducing legislation that would keep the shuttles flying until their replacement is ready, saying that the coming five-year gap in U.S. human space launches is "a major foreign policy blunder."

"This is an issue of priorities. It's not an issue of whether the money is going to be there or not," he said Monday at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. "For us to be totally putting the goal of getting our astronauts into space in the hands of the Russians, I think, is very, very bad foreign policy."

NASA is under presidential orders to complete the International Space Station and retire the shuttles by Sept. 30, 2010. New Orion spacecraft and Ares rockets will not be ready to fly piloted missions until 2015. In the interim, NASA plans to pay Russia to launch its astronauts to the \$100 billion station, which is largely funded by U.S. taxpayers.

Weldon said shuttle fleet operations after 2010 would cost \$2 billion a year. NASA currently spends about \$4 billion a year to operate the fleet.

The plan would enable NASA to retain skilled workers at KSC during the transition from the shuttle program to the new Constellation program, Weldon said.

Local government agencies estimate a loss of 2,500 to 3,500 jobs when the shuttles retire. "I want a soft landing. I don't want to drive NASA and the KSC work force over a cliff," said Weldon, whose district is home to thousands of spaceport employees.

Weldon said the act also would enable NASA to launch a Japanese-built centrifuge and the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, a \$1.5 billion experiment to search for dark matter and antimatter. NASA scrapped plans to launch both to the space station when the number of remaining shuttle missions was slashed after the Columbia accident.

Weldon said NASA's budget has been "flat-lined" since the early 1990s. He said the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation budgets increased 161 percent and 110 percent, respectively, during that time. He said the chances of the legislation passing are slim.

His intent is to raise the issue with presidential candidates as the Jan. 29 Florida primary approaches.

"The timing on this is deliberate," Weldon said. "This needs to be a national debate." In Washington, the proposal drew silence Monday from even staunch NASA supporters.

Lawmakers are smarting from failed efforts to add \$1 billion to next year's NASA budget. The House was poised Monday night to vote on a massive spending bill that includes the \$17.3 billion requested by President Bush, but no more. The White House has threatened to veto anything more.

Sen. Barbara Mikulski, the Maryland Democrat who worked with Texas Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison to get NASA an extra \$1 billion, expressed disappointment Monday that the spending bill lacked that boost. She would not comment further.

Hutchison would not comment on Weldon's plan, saying she had not reviewed the details. "Shuttle continuation is a challenging issue and has to be looked at in broader context," said her press secretary, Matt Mackowiak. That will be revisited next year, he said.

Doug Campbell, a space science adviser for Sen. Bill Nelson, pointed out that NASA Administrator Michael Griffin estimates it would cost \$4 billion a year to keep the shuttle program alive after 2010.

Nelson, a Florida Democrat, would like to see the shuttle fly at least one additional mission to bring the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer up to the space station.

"That's just because it's a billion and a half dollars already spent. It doesn't seem very wise to leave it on the ground," Campbell said. "That's very different from trying to keep the shuttle program going during the gap, which is what Dr. Weldon is proposing."